

# Increasing Outside-the-Classroom English Listening Time: Get Them Hooked on American TV Shows

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## Abstract

Four first-year university Listening classes, consisting of 158 students, were given a unit in which they were asked to listen to one episode per week of a popular English episodic television program for homework and to write reaction papers. The purpose was to evaluate whether the unit seemed to improve their listening and their English competence, and to see if the students were interested enough by the shows that they would continue watching the programs on their own afterwards. Students were given questionnaires after the end of the unit, and they felt that the unit had improved their competence. 76% indicated that they intended to continue watching their show, revealing genuine interest.

Key words: motivation, input, hooked, recreation, TV programs

## Introduction

When I first came to Japan twenty years ago and asked students why they were interested in studying English I heard most of the same answers I hear today when I ask the same question. But one answer I used to hear quite a bit has disappeared. I would estimate that 5 - 10% of my students used to say that they wanted to listen to English movies without subtitles, or just understand English movies better. That answer has completely disappeared among my college-age Japanese students. This is a major change in how English is consumed here in Japan.

As a teacher of English at Japanese universities I've had one type of dispiriting encounter again and again. At the universities I've taught at, students typically take required English classes in their first two years. Many times I've taught students who made excellent progress in their first two years, students I've been proud of, then lost track of them only to meet them again late in their fourth and final year and been shocked to find them having greatly regressed in terms of fluency and understanding. I'll never forget one of my best students from two years before struggling to say "I'm fine," after I asked her "How are you?" just before her graduation.

Yet, can a teacher do anything about this? After all, if we only teach students for two years, how can we have the ability to affect their English after their mandatory course of study ends?

The average Japanese university student who has finished their mandatory courses simply doesn't interact with English much anymore. Some students are in fields of study where they still need to use English in more advanced classes or take classes in their major area of study in English, but these are a minority. Some exceptional students seek out opportunities for communication with foreigners. A few

might study at conversation schools, but this is fairly expensive and for most college students, prohibitive. Of course, there is always pure study, a student can sit down, go through a textbook, use vocabulary flipcards, translate newspaper articles or use any of the countless study methods available. The problem is that the average university student already studies hours a day for his assigned courses and is unlikely to want to get home and study something she doesn't have to study.

One way around this is for students to find a way to use English which is fun for them. If the student perceives the English practice as an enjoyable leisure time activity, using English isn't an exercise of will power, but a habit that becomes easy to maintain. And that is where movies and especially American TV shows come in. More than nearly any other use of a second language outside of communication with friends or romantic partners, movies and TV shows can be great fun. TV shows, because of their serial nature gradually draw the watcher in and make seeing the next show something the student looks forward to, or if the show is good enough, can't wait for.

I decided to experiment with having students watch English-language TV dramas for homework in four mandatory English listening classes at Okayama University in hopes that this would get them interested in, even hooked on, watching the dramas and perhaps becoming interested in English-language videos. I hoped this would increase their integrative motivation towards learning English, and provide them with comprehensible L2 input that they could consume without needing a conversation partner, and that they might eventually come to view this as recreation rather than study.

## **Background**

### **Motivation**

Most teachers would probably agree that motivation is one of the most important factors in success in second language learning, if not the single most important factor. The student who doesn't attend class, sleeps in class when she makes it, and doesn't do the homework is likely going to learn very little. When confronted by that kind of student, it's motivation the teacher will generally address, through threats, bad or failing grades, pep talks, cajoling, stressing the benefits of learning the language, or other means. Student problems outside of competence issues are often addressed by attempting one or another kind of motivation, for instance carrots, sticks or attempts to inspire.

There isn't even a generally accepted definition of motivation, much less a universally accepted theory of what kinds of motivation affects this kind of learning. But the most widely accepted theory so far is associated with Gardner (Gardner & Lambert 1959) and is called the Socio-Cultural Model. His definition of motivation is, "a combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favourable attitudes towards learning the language." The socio-cultural model points out two kinds of motivation for learning a second language, integrative and instrumental motivation.

Instrumental motivation refers to learners who desire not to become part of the culture whose language they are studying but specifically to get some sort of benefit in her own culture from her study. So if the student's motivation comes largely from wanting to pass the college entrance test, get a high TOEFL score, secure a promotion at work, get a good grade in class, generally to use the language as an instrument to achieve some goal in your life, she is instrumentally motivated. What this student wants has nothing to do with learning. Both kinds of motivation have a place in language learning, but instrumental motivation is generally considered an inferior kind of motivation. The language itself and

the culture it allows access to are not specifically generating interest in the student, so this theoretically makes it more difficult to generate energy towards the task of language learning.

The other type of motivation identified by Gardner is integrative motivation, which refers to the learner's desire to integrate to some degree into the L2 culture. If the student wants to watch and understand the sports of that country using the language, is going to do a home stay or an exchange program in the L2 culture, or has made an online friend who is a native speaker, she might be considered integratively motivated. This motivation comes from an admiration of or a wish to become part of the L2 society or culture. It is considered a stronger form of motivation since the learner is directly interested in the culture and the language.

Japanese and Asian students have been shown, though, to be generally instrumentally driven, including successful students. This instrumental/integrative orientation wasn't found to be the best measure of future success at language acquisition for the Japanese (Tewes, 1996). In the case of high school students, the university entrance exams are the paramount concern of many ambitious teens, to the point that their interest in learning English greatly drops off after the exams (Berwick & Ross, 1989). In general, studies have found that Japanese students generally see English more in terms of a qualification, something which can bring a better job or a higher salary than as a tool for understanding or getting to grips with another culture.

R.A. Brown (2004) found that giving his Japanese university freshman questionnaires produced evidence that the students wanted to speak English and believed that "the only thing that can prevent me from becoming as fluent in English as I want to is my own lack of effort." And yet few of that same group of students were confident that they would ever speak English as fluently as they wanted to. It seems that his students had either accepted that they would never be motivated enough to do the amount of work they felt would be necessary to achieve their goals, or perhaps feel that putting a low priority on learning English is a reasonable response to the demands their lives place on them.

### Input Hypothesis

One question that is very relevant when considering my goal of hooking the students on English TV shows is whether listening to a great deal of English in the form of TV dramas is an effective way of acquiring English proficiency, fluency or listening ability. In these programs, students will be listening in English while simultaneously reading subtitles, making what they hear more comprehensible. This form of input seems to fit the guidelines that Krashen's (1983) input hypothesis gives for input that would increase L2 competence.

Practice speaking and practice as well in all four skills would be ideal. But Japanese students don't seem willing in large numbers to ask their friends to practice English with them, and here in Japan don't have frequent opportunities to interact with foreigners often. The L-Café here at Okayama University is a perfect opportunity to do so, but only a very small percentage of students ever become regular L-Café attendees. Getting students to look forward to encounters with the language in their regular TV-watching habit does indeed seem like a workable way to motivate students and spur language acquisition.

Krashen's idea that input does result in second language competence seems to be borne out by the research showing that extensive reading successfully raises TOEIC scores and competence. Krashen's concern with "comprehensible input," though, makes you wonder how comprehensible a natural-speed

English TV show really is. There's a real argument to be made that when students are reading Japanese subtitles at the same time they listen to the English, that a lot of the input does indeed become comprehensible. And while conversations with English native speakers who are willing to slow up their speed enough to have good and friendly conversations would surely be preferable, Japanese students seem unwilling to search out those situations. If watching TV is something students would be willing to do, it seems likely that it could indeed aid their language competence.

### Why TV Programs?

With all this in mind, I decided to assign my students a six-week unit of watching American TV programs. I asked them, each week, to watch one episode of a TV series, to telephone one of their classmates to discuss the program in English, and to then write about the episode.

Why TV programs instead of movies? There are two reasons, and the first is that the last five to ten years have seen the beginning of a golden age in English TV programs, mostly from America. For people of my generation this has been a really surprising development, because traditionally American TV has produced mountains of dross with only occasional good programs showing up. These days, though, when you look at lists of all-time great episodic TV shows, a disproportionately large number are very recent shows, with names like *Breaking Bad*, *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men*, *The Wire*, *The West Wing*, *Friends*, *Frasier*, *The Shield*, *Dexter*, *ER*, *Deadwood* and *Game of Thrones* among the leaders. What's not really noticed is that there are also a whole host of shows that aren't quite as good as those, but are still very good viewing, and that these shows are now easily available in Japan and all over the world, shows like *Prison Break*, *24*, *Suits*, *White Collar*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Lost*, *The OC*, *Heroes*, *House of Cards*, *Glee*, *House*, *Doctor Who*, *Ally McBeal*, *Gossip Girl* and the list goes on, with all these being available at most Japanese video stores.

Aside from the quality, the second reason is that TV shows, unlike most movies, because of their episodic nature, attempt to get the watcher to return for next week's episode. I wondered if it would be easier to get students continuously processing English input by getting them watching TV programs rather than movies. While there are a few movies that have sequels or short series, such as the *Twilight* movies, *Die Hard*, and the *Harry Potter* movies, *Friends* for example has 236 episodes for students to watch. As the students get to know the characters and the situations, I hoped they'd begin to understand more language and become hooked to the programs, thereby making English a regular part of their lives.

### Procedure

The week before beginning this unit, I gave the students a homework assignment to go to a video store and look through the available TV series and write down the top five they would like to watch. The next class, I passed out a sheet (Appendix A) which told them the shows they could consider, and told them to form groups of four people who wanted to watch the same show. I gave them five minutes to walk around the classroom and find like-minded people and to negotiate and form groups. I told them if they wanted to watch something from off of the list, that I'd consider it, and several groups did end up watching different shows: *Bewitched*, *Full House* and the BBC's *Sherlock*. The *Bewitched* and *Full House* groups didn't get very caught up in their shows, so I would have to think about letting groups try older shows again, but the *Sherlock* group wrote great homework and indicated a lot of interest. The

problem with Sherlock is that there are very few programs, nine so far, only six of which are yet available in Japan. Therefore Sherlock might not be a good choice for future students.

They were specifically asked to listen in English, though if they wanted to watch Japanese subtitles at the same time that was OK. But I asked them to consciously think about the English that they were hearing. This would seem to lead to a natural, early end to their “addiction” to the program.

Only two of these programs were half-hour dramas, Friends and Frazier, and nobody chose Frazier, so I told the Friends groups, as well as the groups choosing “off-the-sheet” choices Full House and Bewitched that to even out the time they had to watch two episodes each week, since all the other groups were watching hour-long programs.

Each of the six weeks their homework was the same. First, watch the next episode listening carefully in English, and then phone one of the members of your group and after that, have a 10-minute English conversation about that week’s program and write a two-minute summary of your phone conversation, and a fifteen minute summary of the show, including what happened, what you thought, and what were the deeper themes of the show that week. Finally, I asked them to pick an interesting moment in the show and try to transcribe with a pencil several lines (at least 50 words) in English. They were encouraged to listen several times and to make an effort to get it right. I then asked them to switch the subtitles to English, listen again, and correct their transcription with a red pen.

At the beginning of each class, they joined together into their groups and each group discussed in English the show that week. They compared transcriptions and what each had felt about the show. They then found a group listening to (if possible) a program that they had not yet talked about, and for a period of about ten minutes, formed pairs where each member of the pair was explaining their program, answering questions and either recommending or not recommending it to the new partner.

Between classes, I examined their homework, looking for signs of engagement or boredom in their transcriptions and their writing and graded the homework. On the last week of the unit, I gave them a questionnaire asking them for their impressions of the show and the activity. On the last day of class, about five weeks after the unit ended, I gave them another questionnaire, this one asking them to evaluate which were the most valuable activities they had performed and also whether they had continued to watch their program after the assignments had ended.

## Results

First, it became clear early in the in-class discussions that many students were looking at incidents and conversations from the programs and generalizing, assuming that because it happened in the program it must be common in the United States. Perhaps the best example of this generalizing came in response to the question, “How were English programs different from Japanese programs?” The student replied, “People in America often eat razania. (Is the spell correct?) I haven’t eaten it yet. They don’t put of their shoes at hom. They sometimes watch a hokey game at the stadiam. In Japan, baseball and soccer are more famos than it. They usually invite their friends to their house, and hold a party. Only a few Japanese people do so. For them, the thanksgiving and the Christmas are very important. Japanese people don’t know the thanksgiving clearly.” (sic) While this student’s assumptions that everyone eats lasagna and that hockey is more popular than baseball in America are amusing, in some cases this was a real concern, as students seemed to assume that because there was a great deal of violence in the show,

“24,” that this must be what things were like in America. They assumed the same thing about sex in shows like “Gossip Girl.”

One student said, “In American programs, there are a lot of violent expressions compared the Japanese dramas. At first, I was surprised, but now I’m used to hearing these words. Due to these violent words, American dramas has a reality of life,” about his show, “The Closer,” a police show. Should a teacher be happy about this answer?

In response to the question, “Will you continue watching the program?” a female student replied, “Yes, I enjoyed the program, but I don’t like the blue jokes. In the American programs, there are many blue jokes. As for me, I feel my face gets to be red and hot when the jokes happen in the program,” about the program, “Friends.”

Teachers considering this activity or something like it should account for this. I found it necessary to specifically address this, explaining that just as reality is heightened in Japanese drama to include more violence, sex and conflict than is realistic, the same thing is true, and probably more so, in American programs. They needed to have it pointed out that the purpose of these programs wasn’t to give a realistic picture of American life, it was to be dramatic and hold the viewer’s interest.

Another problem came up concerning one of the programs that got the highest approval ratings. The show, “The Walking Dead,” a sort of human drama with zombies, did not have English subtitles on the DVDs students were able to rent from Tsutaya. It had Japanese subtitles, but none in English. This made it difficult for the students to do the transcription exercise I asked for in the homework. One of the groups found that an English transcription was easily found on the internet. Groups choosing The Walking Dead should be told about this, and if any other shows turn out to have the same problem, they too should be told to check the internet for a transcript. And by the way, “The Walking Dead,” a terrific show that the students liked very much (one student finished all three seasons available at video stores within eight weeks of starting the unit), is a horror show. There is a lot of gore, and people who are even slightly sensitive should be steered away from this show.

### **Questionnaire Answers**

The questionnaires were short answer, so the answers varied. They divided into the answers below quite neatly. If in doubt, I recorded it as a new and different answer. The first question was only given on the questionnaire for three out of the four classes, so there are fewer answers. 92 students answered that question. The second question was asked of all four classes, and was answered by 149 students.

Table 1: Would students give the same homework.

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If you were an English teacher, would you give the same homework?

<u>Answer</u>	<u>Raw Score</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Yes	78	85%
Yes, but differently	4	4%
No	8	9%
Can't say	1	1%
Probably	1	1%

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Table 2: Will students continue watching.

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Will you continue watching your program?

Yes	107	72%
Of course	6	4%
Want to, if/but ...	19	13%
Yes, but different show	6	4%
No	6	4%
Don't know	3	2%
I finished the series	2	1%

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Both of these questions had answers that were positive in terms of my original idea. What was really surprising to me was the number of people saying that they would continue watching. 72% “yes” plus 4% “of course” was much higher than expected.

I asked the students if they'd learned any new words from their shows, and if so what were they?

They answered right at their desks, so many couldn't answer, but the answers given were very interesting, casting light on the genres of the shows and student concerns, and also that they really were picking up vocabulary:

freak me out	Please call me back later
betrayers	mentally disturbed
kidnappers	cellmate
false pregnancy	brotherhood
patch me through to	flammability
traitor	deal
zombies	Whatever it takes.
vagrant	shut your yap
It is just before ...	Don't stop believing.
rest in peace	Everybody needs someone to talk to.
chill out	comfort
ease up	Absolutely.
The world has come to an end.	You're amazing.
psychology	grotesque
a stray bullet	instinctively
a veteran (of the armed forces)	a lesbian

One big surprise was how many students told me during or after this unit that they'd never watched a TV show or movie in English before, that when they watched English video, they had watched the version dubbed into Japanese. Quite a few others told me they'd never watched American movies or TV shows before.

There were concerns about the sexual and violent content. Two students raised concerns about sexual situations in *Gossip Girl* and *Friends*. Given the option of switching to a different program, neither person chose to do so. Both appeared not to have lasting problems or concerns.



### **Interesting Student Responses**

I didn't improve or edit these comments, which were representative.

Q: Did this help your English?

A: Yes, it did. I did not watch dub this program into Japanese, so I could know and hear rhythm and intonation of American English conversations.

Q: Did this help your English?

A: Yes. I have been wanted to watch American movie or TV program to improve my English, but I didn't know what to watch. I tried to rent some DVDs and watch them during summer vacation, but I didn't like them. However, I could find my favorite TV program [Glee] through this class. So, this class was very helpful. I also like The Good Wife, so I tried to watch this show either.

Q: Did you think about listening as you watched? Did your listening improve?

A: Listening from TV shows is so difficult because people speak English fluently. At first, I scarcely could listen to them, but at last I could listen more! It must have helped my listening skill.

Q: If you were an English teacher would you give the same homework? Why or why not?

A: If I were an English teacher, I would give the same homework. But, this homework cost students a lot of time and little money. So I will give this homework for two or three times. After that, students became to be interested in American TV show, they will go to rental shops and start to see it again.

Q: Did you think the show helped with your English or not?

A: It helped me so much!! Because I'm very interested in Glee, recently I always listen to songs in English and watch youtube's movie with lyrics. When I find the word which I don't know it means, I look it up on the dictionary. My vocabulary became better little by little.

### **Conclusion**

Student interest was very high. I was worried whether students would listen in English or in Japanese. They indicated anonymously with no exceptions that they'd listened in English. In large majorities, they felt their listening and their English competence had improved, and that they would give this homework if they were teachers.

Two students noted that the sexual language and situations in two programs were embarrassing. Asked immediately if they'd like to change to a different program, neither student changed. Neither had any later comments or concerns about this.

76% of the students indicated that they intended to continue watching these programs. This was far higher than expected. 85% said if they were teachers they would give the same homework. Discussion was animated and excited in the class discussion groups. This was absolutely enough of a success to support continuation next year with a few tweaks, such as warning them before the unit that these shows

aren't realistic, they are dramatic and only reflect real American culture to a degree.

Surprised by how many students told me that they hadn't watched English movies or TV before or that had only watched them dubbed into Japanese, I felt one question well worth studying before the unit starts is their previous viewing habits. This would improve the study.

Another interesting question would be to go back the next year and ask how many are still watching the shows and how often. That wouldn't be easy, as many if not most of these students won't be in my classes next year, but would make an interesting addition

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## Appendix A - First Day sheet, giving classwork, program names and the homework assignment

I'm going to ask you to form groups of four people who want to watch the same TV program. You'll then rent the first DVD of the series. Each week, you'll write about one episode of the show.

Today in class, I'll ask you to form groups and try to pick your shows. Here are some possible shows you might want to watch.

Comedies:

Friends  
Frazier

Horror:

The Walking Dead

Adventure:

24  
Prison Break  
Person of Interest  
Burn Notice

Science Fiction:

Battlestar Galactica  
Stargate  
Doctor Who  
Torchwood

Human Drama:

Gossip Girl  
Beverly Hills 90210  
The OC  
Glee  
The Good Wife

Police and Crime:

Third Watch  
Blue Bloods  
The Closer

Homework:

- 1) Have a telephone call - completely in English - for ten minutes about the television program with one of the members of your group.
- 2) Write for two minutes. Tell me what you talked about on the phone. DON'T try to write every word you said. Just summarize and tell me what you talked about.
- 3) Try to write down 50 words or more (about three to six three lines, maybe) from your show. It will probably be from a conversation. Listen carefully and transcribe the lines. After you finish, you can check the lines with English subtitles and correct yourself in red pen.
- 4) Write for 15 minutes. a) What happened? b) What do you think of the show? c) What are the deeper themes the show is about?

**Appendix B - How many students chose each program, and Approval Ratings on a 1 - 10 Scale**

<u>Program Title</u>	<u>Chosen by</u>	<u>Average Score 1 - 10 Rating</u>	<u>Average Score Separated by Class Level</u>
Prison Break	18 students	9.05	Advanced 8.3 Intermediate 9.2
The Closer	6 students	8.7	Advanced 8.7 Intermediate 8.7
Glee	38 students	8.5	Advanced 7.8 Intermediate 8.7
24	17 students	8.5	Advanced 8.6 Intermediate 8.4
The Walking Dead	7 students	8.4	Advanced 8.5 Intermediate 8.3
Full House	5 students	8.3	Advanced xx Intermediate 8.3
Person of Interest	9 students	8.2	Advanced 8.0 Intermediate 8.5
Gossip Girl	11 students	8.2	Advanced 8.0 Intermediate 8.5
Bewitched	4 students	8.0	Advanced xx Intermediate 8.0
Friends	7 students	7.9	Advanced 7.0 Intermediate xx
Fringe	7 students	7.5	Advanced xx Intermediate 7.5